

Rowley, Hazel  
RICHARD WRIGHT: The Life and Times  
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An insightful look at the African-American cultural icon and iconoclast within a social context.

Best known for two of his earlier works, the novel *Native Son* (1940) and the autobiography *Black Boy* (1945), Wright was born a sharecropper's son near Natchez in 1908. The boy's father abandoned the family for another woman, forcing them into extreme poverty. Richard was placed in an orphanage for a time before being shipped off to his grandmother in Jackson who tried to break him of his writing aspirations and other "soul-defiling habits." Chicago became Wright's Promised Land — until actually moving there at nineteen. Segregation mandated his living in the miserable South Side ghetto. Rowley links the concurrent private and public events that find expression and transformation in his fiction. Wright managed to secure a job with the Post Office and then worked for the Federal Writers' Project, first in Chicago and then New York. He read voraciously and wrote, publishing his first story, "Superstition," in 1931. Biographer Rowley presents him as less single-minded and serious than other accounts, however, drawing on Wright's packrat trove of first drafts, appointment books, bills, letters, photographs, and newspaper clippings. She posits the reasonable theory that the attraction of Wright and other authors, such as Ralph Ellison and Langston Hughes, to the Communist Party was their acceptance as men and their equality among white intellectuals and artists. Wright became the Harlem editor of the *Daily Worker* in 1937 and married white Party member Ellen Poplar four years later. He eventually broke with the Party over its conformist ideologies and moved with his family to Paris after World War II. There he wrote two more novels, several long political and sociological works, another collection of short stories, a second memoir, and 4,000 haikus before his death in 1960.

Rowley consults some new sources for her depiction of the first black American author to portray his race realistically while asserting that "Negroes are Negroes because they are treated as Negroes."